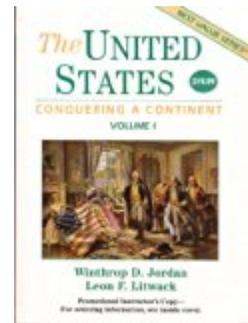


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Winthrop D. Jordan, Leon F. Litwack. *The United States: Conquering A Continent, Volume 1*. Redding: North West Publishing, 2003. iii + 397 pp. \$26.75 (paper), ISBN 978-1-931910-15-6.

Reviewed by David Harbin (Social Science Department, John Wood Community College)
Published on H-Survey (August, 2003)



Making the Past Affordable

Making the Past Affordable

Among the first things that visitors notice, as soon as they walk in the door of my office, are the bookshelves, extending from floor to ceiling, and covering, with little exception, all available wall space. Some of my fellow faculty members refer to my office, quite good-naturedly, as “the Cave,” or “the Library of Congress annex.” But such is the nature of the discipline. History teachers use books, and the more books the better. One bookshelf in particular that captures attention contains nothing but textbooks. As I look at this odd, but not impressively diverse, hodgepodge of American history volumes, I cannot help but wonder, “why are there so many different textbooks written about American history?” One of the principle reasons is, obviously, financial. Writers and editors seeking to produce a better product constantly revise, retool, and redo previous editions so that they can remain competitive. A majority of this reworking is done not on the text itself, but rather on the accompanying “bells and whistles.” Every textbook published today has ancillary materials such as a primary source documents reader, interactive CD-ROMs, and a companion web site. There are maps, diagrams, and portraits all reproduced in bold, vivid colors designed to capture readers’ attention, maximize the text’s appeal, and insure its primacy in the American history textbook pantheon. But we are reaching the point of saturation. Every text published has, roughly, the same supplemental materials: the same primary sources are reprinted in the documents collection or on the interactive CD-ROM and the same images stare back, only from different pages. Even the compan-

ion web sites differ little from one another, and more in aesthetics than in content. It seems that, if writers of textbooks are going to continue to distance themselves from their competition, then new avenues are soon going to be required.

The United States: Conquering a Continent by Winthrop D. Jordan and Leon F. Litwack is a “bare bones” approach to the study of American history.[1] There is nothing radical or sweeping about the way in which the text is organized and presented. It begins, as does every other survey, with the arrival of the first “Americans” during the last glacial epoch and their eventual settlement of the American continents, and it concludes with the period of Reconstruction following the end of the Civil War. It is, and this is not meant to echo as a criticism, a quite ordinary text. In fact, one could argue that the straightforward, unadulterated plainness of the book is one of its principal strengths. In general, I found the authors’ approach to be fair and balanced in their presentation of the social, economic, intellectual, and cultural history of the American nation.

Before I examine any “Achilles’ Heel” that might be present in the text, I wish to highlight a few of the specific areas I found to be valid strengths of this current edition. The principal strength of the text is its affordability. When I received my review copy I was immediately drawn to the price, which is emblazoned on the front cover and evidently an aspect of the text that the authors wish to emphasize, and rightly so. By way of comparison, I checked dozens of other American His-

tory survey texts and discovered not a single other text so proudly displayed their price. At around \$20, *The United States* is well within the budgets of even the most underfunded college student and, perhaps more importantly, high school curriculums that seem to be perpetually on the bottom rung of the budgetary ladder.[2]

Second, although the text is not the most visually impressive on the market, Jordan and Litwack have spread over sixty detailed maps and illustrations throughout the text, providing the reader with essential information on such topics as immigration from the “Old World,” the African origins of the slave trade, and the disposition of the states on the eve of the Civil War. One of the most interesting maps compares the elections of 1796 and 1800. This black-and-white presentation of eighteenth-century party politics provides both teacher and student an opportunity to analyze the vagaries of partisanship in the early Republic, as well as providing a basis for what could be a heated discussion on the utilitarian aspects of parties in the present and the fickle nature of the American electorate. All of the visual reproductions in the text are in black and white and, while some may find the lack of color unappealing, it does not detract from the content of the text. What is more important, substance or shading? While appearance cannot be overlooked, it is not as though illustrative materials are lacking altogether. I, for one, cannot believe that my students would be more inclined to pick up their American History text if the map comparing the elections of 1796 and 1800 were reproduced in four colors rather than two. Also, any negative that might be found in the plainness of the text has to be balanced with its economy.

Finally, the text’s content is straightforward and easy to read. Its writing is clear and, with few exceptions, the scholarship is sound. Jordan, the primary author of this volume, opens each chapter with a succinctly worded introduction designed to focus readers’ attention and place them in the correct mindset for the material that follows. The chapters are, at an average size of twenty pages, effortless to read and straightforward, even for students who, by their own admission, “don’t read.” Additionally, Jordan concludes each chapter with a concise summary and comprehensive bibliography of suggested readings.

It has been a long time since I read a survey text cover-to-cover and then it was not done with any effort made at analysis or examination, but rather as something which had to be done. In reading *The United States* in its entirety, I did not find it to be laborious or unpleasant, nor did I find any severe deficiencies. That does not mean

that there were not areas that I would have done differently; there were, and I will discuss some of those in the following paragraphs.

Although the text has many nice qualities, there are a few minor faults which, if for nothing more than balance and objectivity, I will discuss. Although not serious flaws, I strongly believe that they should be clarified in later editions. For example, in chapter 7, Jordan, who was the principal author of this material, asserts that the architect of “the so called Virginia Plan” was Edmund Randolph—not James Madison, as almost every other text maintains. Although, as Virginia’s governor, Randolph presented the Plan to the Convention, it should not be framed in the context of his having been the principal author. Madison, who began laying the foundation and drafting the proposals for what would eventually become the Virginia Plan as soon as he arrived in Philadelphia, is not even mentioned. If Jordan has information that contradicts other American history surveys, then it should be mentioned in the material.

In chapter 15, titled “Manifest Destiny and Slavery,” Jordan’s information is simply flawed. In this chapter, Jordan is bringing his narrative to the eventual, and inevitable, conflict between two radically different societies: the free, industrial North, and the slave, agrarian South. In attempting to define the somewhat indefinable ideology of Manifest Destiny, Jordan addresses the settlement of Utah by the Church of Jesus Christ of Later-day Saints, the Mormons. Jordan asserts that the principal reason the Mormons were expelled from Illinois in the mid-1840s was Joseph Smith’s proclamations concerning polygamy and plural marriage; such an assertion is not historically accurate. The Mormons, who were initially welcomed to Illinois, and given carte blanche in the establishment of a theocratic city-state at Nauvoo, were reviled, eventually, because of the threat they posed as an economic, political, and military juggernaut. Even when the doctrines of polygamy and celestial marriage were exposed in the local papers, there was not a moralistic crusade launched against the Mormons nor specifically Smith. The Saints were more of a threat to the non-Mormon “gentiles” at the ballot box, not in the bedroom. Jordan’s timeline is also askew. Smith and his brother Hyrum were killed by a rabble of “respectable men” while awaiting trial; then, Nauvoo was mobbed. I realize that there are limitations of space, and we could fill volumes with the history that is left out of texts; however, all of the above could be worked to fit in the space that Jordan uses to discuss the Saints and their movements west.

Finally, a third deficiency of this volume—when compared to other current survey texts—is the lack of any inclusion of online Internet resources that students might avail themselves of and further their historical memories. In the modern world, such information is a necessity. Jordan and Litwack have included, at the end of every chapter, a section detailing secondary works, although the same could be done for online resources. Students should be guided to those websites and online resources that have reputable scholarship supporting them. Even the inclusion of a few online sources would serve to guide students to valuable historical information in the “virtual world.” I am not a technophile but, by the same token, I am not a Luddite. I can see the value and application of technology in the classroom, and find it curious that a 2003 text takes no account of technology.[3]

Overall, I found several aspects of the text to be positive (the fact that it is easy on the pocket, for example), and such an economical and long-lived text (in publication since the late 1950s) has a place in the history classroom. Even those few areas that I note as weak spots are not severe enough to detract from the overall quality and affordability of the work. Had I more time, I would have made copies available to some of my students so that they could compare *The United States: Conquering a Continent* with the text that I presently use. I might still do that, as it would be interesting to get their perspective and insight on the text.

Notes

[1]. A few days after sending the original draft of this

review to H-Survey, I was contacted by the editor, Dr. Joan Gundersen, regarding an article appearing in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (June 26, 2003). The article addressed the rather unsettling issue of textbook publishers “buying off” professors in order to insure adoption of texts. This article was also of particular interest, since the publisher cited as the principal offender North West Publishing, and the text I was asked to review is featured quite prominently. According to the article, in the case of North West, instructors are approached to review a text for a sizable stipend. The figure given by the *Chronicle* was \$4,000, quite a sizable remuneration for a simple review. The implicit understanding is that the instructors are not simply being paid to review the text, they are being paid to adopt it. The editor for this review, Dr. Gundersen, thought that I should state, forcefully, that I and others who review for H-Net receive no remuneration. I am also not adopting the text for my courses. [Editor’s Note: See accompanying commentary by Harbin on this issue.]

[2]. Author’s note: the price for the text is that given by North West; in the *Chronicle* article, the price is listed as being much higher.

[3]. It is obvious, from Jordan’s comments in the *Chronicle*, that he and Litwack were not consulted by North West as to any revisions they might make; North West merely replicated the last edition of the text. That would explain the fact that the suggested readings do not contain any recent works; they appear to end in the late 1980s.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-survey>

Citation: David Harbin. Review of Jordan, Winthrop D.; Litwack, Leon F., *The United States: Conquering A Continent, Volume 1*. H-Survey, H-Net Reviews. August, 2003.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=8032>

Copyright © 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.